

WATER CONSERVATION

FEB 1991-



# Is the drought really THAT bad?

WATER CONSERVATION

By all accounts, the answer is 'yes'; this weekend's rain is just a drop in the bucket

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By Chris Bowman  
McClatchy News Service

SACRAMENTO — You get wet . . . you turn the spigot off," Gov. Pete Wilson told a room full of news reporters and television cameras. "You soap yourself down, and when you are ready to rinse, you turn it back on again.

"And you don't have to allow the faucet to run while you are brushing your teeth."

When the governor uses a press conference to lecture Californians on water conservation in the bathroom, it is time to wonder:

Is the drought really THAT bad?

By all the official gauges, yes. California — even with the rain this weekend — is headed for the worst water crisis ever this summer and fall.

Four consecutive years of drought has left the Golden State with record low storage in some key reservoirs. Farm houses submerged decades ago have come back into view.

The latest water surveys show the snowpack in the northern Sierra Nevada at just 25 percent of normal, as low as during the fabled drought of 1977. The eastern Sierra snow pack that provides Los Angeles with 70 percent of its water was only 13 percent of normal, a level that Mayor Tom Bradley called "astounding and frightening."

Midway through another dud of a rainy season, the Sacramento Valley counties of Colusa, Glenn and Sutter declared a state of emergency because of the drought's impact on dry land farming and ranching.

won't go thirsty this year. Nor will a fifth year of drought devastate the valuable farming economy, agricultural officials say.

"Yes, it's going to get very difficult for some growers, but we're not going to dry up and blow away, thank you," said Ray Borton, chief economic analyst for the state Department of Food and Agriculture.

Some farmers, such as those who grow pears along the Sacramento River near Cortland, have secure rights to abundant water. Other growers can compensate simply by pumping groundwater, albeit at much higher cost than the government-subsidized reservoir water. Lettuce fields are mostly unaffected by the drought with the Salinas Valley drawing all its irrigation water from underground.

"We are just going ahead and mining the groundwater in hopes that it will be replenished in a few years," Borton said.

Growers are also switching to crops such as safflower that require less water, using drip irrigation and watering more at night to minimize evaporation, he said.

The state drought planners offer little hope, however for the fish, wildlife and forests. More deer, bears and mountain lions will roam afield into urban areas in search of food. More fish will face water too warm to spawn. More dry timber will invite beetle infestation.

## Still some hope

Of course, winter is not over. It doesn't take much rain to allay a

are dusting off their "worst scenario" plans: rationing, cutbacks and water policing.

The state Water Resources Control Board is considering a 300-gallon cap on daily household use statewide.

Some officials in San Francisco and Los Angeles already are calling for water rationing. Some small towns in the Sierra foothills and along the coast plan to truck water to residents. The Santa Barbara County community of Goleta has plans to import Canadian water by tanker vessels.

## Rationing

Dozens of water districts in Contra Costa, Alameda, Sacramento, Yolo, Placer and El Dorado counties have mapped out conservation ordinances and emergency plans.

Agriculture, one of the biggest contributors to the state's economy, stands to suffer increased cutbacks in government-subsidized water. Many farmers can expect reductions of at least 50 percent in the amount of aqueduct water they normally receive through the giant Central Valley Project aqueducts, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation officials said.

Growers who rely on State Water Project deliveries have been warned that they may receive no water this year.

At greatest risk are farmers who are wholly dependent on government projects for their water and who cannot afford to drill at \$100,000 per well, agricultural experts said.

Such a farmer is Bill Koster of

water he receives from the Delta-Mendota Canal. Last year, when federal project operators ordered a drought-related reduction of 50 percent, the fourth-generation farmer said he was forced to buy water from a neighboring grower — at quadruple the cost. If the curtailments are reinstated this year, Koster said, he'll sacrifice all but the almond and walnut groves.

"The governor says people will survive, but I'm probably going to lose all my row crops," he said.

## Farmers' fears

The drought has also height-

ened farmers' fears that cities and environmental interest will press for transfers of water from crop fields to the growing cities. Agriculture consumes about 85 percent of the state's water.

But Gov. Wilson has made it clear he will not let farmers bear the brunt of the drought. Wilson said he would invoke special executive powers under the state's Emergency Services Act, if necessary, to override any agency — local, state or federal.

"I am your governor," Wilson said at the Capitol press conference Friday, "And whatever steps I have to take I will see to it that all Californians are treated fairly."



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Midway through another dud of a rainy season, the Sacramento Valley counties of Colusa, Glenn and Sutter declared a state of emergency because of the drought's impact on dry land farming and ranching.

## **Bad as 1977**

Taken altogether, conditions this year are shaping up to be at least as severe and extensive as the drought of 1977. While some gains in conservation have been made since that record dry year, today's water brokers have 6 million more Californians to satisfy.

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The state drought planners offer little hope, however for the fish, wildlife and forests. More deer, bears and mountain lions will roam afield into urban areas in search of food. More fish will face water too warm to spawn. More dry timber will invite beetle infestation.

## **Still some hope**

Of course, winter is not over. It doesn't take much rain to allay a water crisis in California. "It's really too early to say we're all doomed," said Gerald Merral, who recalls the miracle rains that ended the drought of 1977, when he served as the state's deputy water director. "There's two whole months of the rainy season left," Merril said. "In a week, the drought could be history."

Most water officials, though, view the winter as half over and

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# Counties *WATER CONSERVATION* declare WED FEB 20 1991 drought disaster

By Steve Geissinger  
The Associated Press

SACRAMENTO — Nearly a fifth of California's counties have now proclaimed drought disasters and asked the governor to declare local emergencies in their areas to clear the way for government aid.

But the 11 counties, from Santa Barbara in the south to Mendocino in the north, are not depending solely on decisions by Gov. Wilson. Most also have appealed directly to the U.S. agriculture secretary, who has the power to independently declare a county an agricultural disaster area.

The update on the 11 counties in a state of emergency, out of the total 58, is contained in a Feb. 15 report by the governor's Drought Action Team. Wilson created the task force earlier this month to guide his management of California's fifth drought year, the driest year on record.

County supervisors have declared the local emergencies — most in recent months — in Colusa, Glenn, Kern, Madera, Marin, Mendocino, Santa Barbara, Sonoma, Sutter, Tulare and Yuba counties.

The report said Madera first declared an emergency in 1988, while Marin, Sonoma and Kern counties made the proclamations earlier this month. Former Gov. George Deukmejian proclaimed Santa Barbara in a state of emergency last year.

Contra Costa County supervisors took action on a drought disaster declaration on Feb. 11. Alameda County Supervisor Ed Campbell is scheduled to ask his board to take similar action Feb. 26.

Supervisors said they issued

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the proclamations because of drought damage to crops and an array of other needs, including funds to pay for importing water in trucks or by some other means to replace disappearing surface and well supplies in rural areas.

Nearly every county expects some rural water supplies to dry up this summer, especially in the Sierra Nevada foothills, according to the report. Statewide, nearly all of the 10,000 small water providers that serve towns depend on surface water, which is rapidly running out, the report said.

"Some communities . . . are already hauling water . . . Mendocino is hauling water. In Tuolumne County, the towns of Sonora, Tuolumne and Jamestown expect to run out of water by May, as does the town of Mariposa, in Mariposa County, sometime this summer," says the report.

The shortages will mean that water cannot be used for fire-fighting without exhausting supplies needed for human health and safety in some rural areas, according to the report.

County supervisors, in making the emergency declarations, ruled that the peril to safety and property went beyond local capabilities. The local proclamations allow them to use emergency funds, resources and powers, while diverting funds from other programs to cover emergency costs.

But they said it is the state, and, to a greater degree, the federal disaster declarations that eventually bring major aid.

Wilson has declined to declare a statewide drought emergency, saying that local governments are managing the situation.

The report by the governor's drought task force said all water supply conditions are worse now

than they were at this time in 1977, previously the driest year in California records.

Statewide, runoff into rivers is about a third of average, the snowpack is a fifth of normal, rainfall is about a fourth of average, and reservoir storage is about one-half of normal, according to the study.

Some areas are worse, state water officials said. On the north coast, the snowpack is about 15 percent normal and on the Central Coast, reservoirs hold about 15 percent of the usual storage.

Besides considering local emergency declarations by counties, state officials said in the report that they are:

- Analyzing construction of a salinity control barrier in the western Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

- Evaluating whether to relax water quality standards so that more recycled water can be used.

- Developing specific programs to restore hard-hit fish and wildlife populations after the drought ends.

The efforts are part of the drought strategy Wilson announced Friday.

The plan is aimed primarily at hastening water transfers to parched areas, bolstering fire protection, coaxing all cities into rationing, drilling wells to save wetland areas for wildlife, and trucking fish downstream to spots with higher water levels.

Part of a \$100 million emergency fund will be used for loans to public and private water agencies to develop new water supplies, and fund reclamation and conservation projects.

The governor's plan follows huge cuts in water deliveries announced earlier this month by California's two major government water projects, the Central Valley Project and the State Water Project.



# No time to stop rationing

WED MAR 6 - 1991

For the past week, many Californians have gone about their daily lives with a little less stress, a little less worry. For this, they have the rain and snow to thank.

It isn't ordinary for people of the Bay Area and the rest of the state to rely on rain or snow to lighten their otherwise busy lives. After all, the bland weather in most of California is generally taken for granted.

But these haven't been ordinary times. We're in the midst of a 5-year-old drought. So the rain and snow of the past week have been most welcome. As drenched as we may feel at the moment, however, we're still a long way from normal water conditions. This means conservation measures, either voluntary or mandatory, remain a high priority for agencies that deliver water and for all water consumers.

"It has been very nice, very helpful," Maurice Roos, chief hydrologist of the California Department of Water Resources, said of the precipitation that began a week ago today. "It probably transforms an extremely critical situation into one that is just critical."

The wet weather over the past week brought Oakland's seasonal rainfall total to about 8 inches, far below the 14 inches in a normal year to date. This season's total is also significantly lower than last year's below-normal 12 inches at this time.

The East Bay Municipal Utility District, which sells water to about 1.2 million people in Alameda and Contra Costa counties, is pleased with the recent rain and snow, but cautions that drought conditions still exist. The district's reservoirs, even after the weeklong rainfall, are only at 51 percent of capacity at this time, compared with 75 percent in normal years. Snow depth at Cables Lake in the Sierra Nevada, a key locale for measuring EBMUD's future water "bank," is 42 inches, compared with the normal 78 inches for this time of year.

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The recent concentrated rainfall has prompted EBMUD to re-evaluate its need to seek temporary sources of water. The district's board had authorized \$3.5 million to buy water.

For the moment, EBMUD is still planning on instituting some kind of mandatory rationing plan. The district held public hearings this week — Monday night in Oakland, last night in Walnut Creek — to hear reactions to proposed conservation measures. The one we favor remains an across-the-board limit on the number of gallons a household can use per day.

EBMUD is far from being alone. The giant Metropolitan Water District in Los Angeles, which provides most of the water for six counties from San Diego to Ventura, voted Monday to cut water deliveries by 50 percent to agencies that serve 15 million people. This will certainly lead to mandatory rationing throughout perennially thirsty Southern California.

If, however, an inordinate amount of wet weather occurs in the coming weeks, then EBMUD and other California water districts could shelve mandatory rationing plans. Even so, voluntary conservation will still be a good idea.

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# Strict rationing continues

**WATER CONSERVATION**

*By Tribune staff and news services*

**SACRAMENTO** — Despite March rains that loosened the drought's grip on most of California, federal water project officials yesterday said they will continue strict rationing so they can store more water for use next year.

That means there will be no rationing relief for the 400,000 customers who get their water from the Contra Costa Water District. CCWD gets virtually all of its supply through a contract with the federal Central Valley Project.

The district imposed a 26 percent mandatory rationing plan on its customers in central and eastern Contra Costa County on April 1. With no increase in deliveries from the federal project, it means the rationing plan will remain unchanged, said district spokeswoman Ivy Morrison Newman.

CCWD's annual allotment from the federal project has been cut by 50 percent.

The federal project announcement follows earlier word from the State Water Project that thanks to March rains, it would be able to increase its deliveries to cities, though it will still deliver far less than normal.

The overall increase in storage for the federal project and boost in deliveries by the state project were made possible by March rains that were 292 percent of normal for the month, bringing California's total to about 63 percent of average.

The decision to continue federal project rationing to ensure maximum carryover storage for next year has not been popular with customers, said Larry Hancock, a U.S. Bureau of Reclamation regional director.

"If someone came into my office and said I was going to have a 75 percent pay cut . . . , I'd be upset," Hancock said. "Essentially, that's what we've told the agricultural water users."

Hancock said he has told upset customers that the project is "trying to ensure there is an adequate reserve for next year."

Federal project officials said rationing will continue at 25 percent for farmers and 75 percent for farmers who have special rights because they were dipping from rivers before construction of project dams.

The few municipal customers served by the project will receive 25 percent to 100 percent of their normal supplies, depending on their contracts with the government.



# Inventory of regional water supplies

THU JAN 31 1991

Here's how water supplies for the Bay Area's big water districts stack up:

■ **East Bay Municipal Water District:** Reservoirs are at 52 percent of average, but one-third is in Camanche Reservoir and is for long-standing agricultural contracts near Lodi and fisheries on the Mokelumne River. Precipitation in the district's Sierra watershed is 24 percent of normal.

There is currently a 15 percent voluntary water use cutback. It will be increased if dry conditions continue.

The district is looking to buy additional supplies. It has a pumping plant in the delta ready

*conservation*  
to use.

■ **Contra Costa Water District:** It gets all its water from the delta through a contract with the federal Bureau of Reclamation.

A 25 percent cutback in supply last year resulted in voluntary conservation. A likely additional 25 percent cut may mean mandatory rationing. The federal allotment will be decided Feb. 15.

■ **San Francisco Water Department:** The city and its suburban customers, including Hayward, may receive only 50 percent of usual supplies. The district's Hetch Hetchy reservoir is at 51 percent of average.

The current 25 percent ration-

ing may have to be doubled to 50 percent if the drought persists. The department is working to buy additional supplies.

■ **Marin Municipal Water District:** Severely low reservoirs could mean a 45 percent use reduction will be necessary. Mandatory rationing could go into effect as early as this week.

■ **Santa Clara Valley Water District:** With local reservoirs down, possible cuts in supplies from the state and federal water projects could mean rationing greater than the 20 percent to 25 percent now in effect.

— Marie Felde